

COINS

Stop figuring: Faces on money too many to count

By Roger Boye

This week's column answers questions about paper money, a popular collectible.

Q — How many famous Americans have been portrayed on our currency? My guess is 25, but a friend says only 10. — T.D., Franklin Park

A — Neither of you is close. The list numbers more than 150, and it includes about 10 Presidents, Martha Washington, Civil War generals, Cabinet members, and inventors, among them Robert Fulton and Samuel F.B. Morse.

The number is so high because until 1928 the government frequently changed the designs used on paper money. Also, a few bills depict dozens of people, such as signers of the Declaration of Independence shown on the back of \$2 Federal Reserve notes now in circulation.

Q — For more than 50 years, my family has owned two \$100 Treasury notes issued by the state of Virginia during the Civil War. Who will cash them for us? — R.E., Skokie

A — No one. Bills issued by the Confederate government or Southern states during the Civil War are not legal tender. That's because the 14th Amendment to the Constitution forbids government (federal or state) from paying off any notes issued "in aid of insurrection or rebellion against the United States."

Most likely, however, your notes have value as collector's items. You should show them to a coin dealer or other expert for evaluation.

Q — How much were German "inflation bills"

worth in American money when they were first printed? — A.N., Chicago

A — Almost nothing. By the end of 1923, for example, a 20 billion marks note was worth about .0003 of a U.S. cent.

Germany suffered from rampant inflation from the end of World War I until 1924, when the government revamped its currency system. Today, most German inflation bills have only nominal collector value because so many of them have survived.

Q — I've found a \$5 bill with large blotches of green ink on the back side. What went wrong? — T.O., Oak Park

A — Someone or something goofed at the government's Bureau of Engraving and Printing, where paper money is made. The blotches are smeared ink caused by broken printing plates or improperly mixed ink. Your bill could be worth at least four times face value if it is in uncirculated condition.

Q — While Christmas shopping, I received in change two series 1977 \$1 bills with the serial numbers ending in a star rather than a letter. Does this have any significance? — K.C., Rolling Meadows.

A — The stars indicate that your bills were made to replace "regular bills" damaged during the printing process. For example, if the Bureau of Engraving and Printing destroys 1,000 poorly printed bills on a given day, it produces a like number of star notes as substitutes.

In recent years, the government has made millions of \$1 bills with stars; the series 1977 variety is often found in circulation.

Want to know the "collector value" of your silver certificates, Federal Reserve notes, or other old bills? For a two-page price guide to U.S. currency printed since 1928, send a long, stamped envelope to: Roger Boye, Arts & Books, Chicago Tribune, 435 N. Michigan Av., Chicago, Ill. 60611.

Roger Boye also answers other questions about old coins and currency. Enclose a self-addressed, stamped envelope if you want a personal reply.